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U.S.-Washington Post Talks on Article With Secret Data Called 6th Case in Year

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

The Administration's current discussions with The Washington Post about publication of an article based on classified information mark the sixth time in the last 12 months that Government officials have pressed the newspaper to withhold or alter an impending article, Leonard Downie Jr., the managing editor of The Post, said Friday.

In two cases, Mr. Downie said, The Post complied with the Administration and did not disclose the name of a figure in an article because Administration officials said identification would have endangered the person's life.

Katharine Graham, the chief executive officer of The Washington Post Company, said no decision would be made on the current article until Benjamin C. Bradlee, the executive editor, returned from a trip abroad.

Mr. Bradlee was scheduled to arrive back in Washington this weekend, but Mr. Downie said no decision was imminent or would be made before this week at the earliest.

Request Treated 'Seriously'

"They've made a request that's been made before," Mrs. Graham said. "It's a serious request, and we are treating it equally seriously."

This instance differs from the previous ones, however, because it is occurring against the backdrop of what Mr. Downie termed the Administration's "increasingly aggressive" stance against officials who leak classified information and newspapers and magazines that publish it.

The Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, warned this month that he would consider prosecuting The Post if it published the article by Bob Woodward and Patrick Tyler about American intelligence abilities. In more general terms, Mr. Casey has threatened to bring charges against newspapers and magazines that publish classified information.

The Administration has recently dismissed officials in the State and Defense Departments on accusations of leaking material to the press.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz on Friday ordered the dismissal of Spencer C. Warren, a member of the State Department's policy planning staff, for "an unauthorized disclosure of classified information to the news media." He was reported to have leaked a highly classified cablegram that was sent to Mr. Shultz last month by Frank V. Ortiz Jr., the American Ambassador to Argentina, criticizing the behavior of the House Speaker, Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., and other members of a delegation that visited Argentina.

Pentagon Aide Dismissed

Last month, Michael E. Pillsbury, an Assistant Under Secretary of Defense, was dismissed after he reportedly failed to pass a polygraph test. He was suspected of having leaked to The Post and the syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak information that Mr. Casey had gone to Angola to arrange for the covert shipment through Zaire of anti-aircraft missiles to Jonas Savimbi's insurgent Angolan forces.

On Friday, George Lauder, a spokesman for the C.I.A., said intelligence officials had been ordered not to cooperate with The New York Times or any other newspaper by providing information about intelligence matters.

Mrs. Graham confirmed that "a whole series of exchanges" between Post editors and Administration officials had occurred over the last several weeks regarding the article by Mr. Woodward and Mr. Tyler. Mr. Downie said the meetings had taken place at neutral sites — neither The Post nor Government offices — and had been augmented by telephone conversations.

"I think the Administration has a genuine concern," Mr. Downie said, "and all you have to do is look at the subject and you know why."

"Mr. Casey and other senior Administration officials have raised some strong objections, national security objections that can't be lightly dismissed," he said. "And this very real threat to prosecute has been made."

Administration officials have said the information obtained by The Post might have included some of the classified data — about American systems used to intercept communications — that Ronald W. Pelton purportedly delivered to the Soviet Union. Mr. Pelton, a former employee of the National Security Agency, is now in jail awaiting trial on an espionage charge.

Tries to Play Down 'Contacts'

Mr. Downie has in some ways tried to play down the discussions with the Administration, calling them "contacts" rather than "negotiations," the term White House officials have used in discussing the matter. Mr. Woodward and Mr. Tyler, the reporters for the article at issue, have said they are not concerned about the discussions.

"It's the policy of this newspaper that we're happy to hear from the Administration if they have some concerns," said Mr. Woodward, the assistant managing editor of The Post and the author of a coming book on the C.I.A. "I agree with that policy."

He added that he did not believe the Administration's concerns with the article were justified by its content.

Mrs. Graham wrote in The Post's Outlook section in April: "I want to emphasize that the media are willing to — and do — withhold information that is likely to endanger human life or jeopardize national security."